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(Re)visiting Black Women and Girls in the Cinematic Hood: “Who you callin’ a hoe?”

Emma Horrex

1. Introducing the Black Women and Girls in the Hood via *Boyz*

1 Amidst an ongoing debate regarding the lack of racial diversity in last year’s Oscar nominations (2016), *Boyz N the Hood* (*Boyz*, 1991) was honoured by the African American Film Critics Association during a “Celebration of Hip Hop Cinema” in February 2016, twenty-five years since capturing the public imagination and academic attention. Directed by John Singleton, the film emerged during and reflected an important moment of the post-Reagan political and cinematic landscape. President Bush’s inaugural address in 1989 claimed that America was “in a peaceful, prosperous time” but despite increasing the minimum wage, the economic recession in July 1990 undercut this notion as widespread poverty penetrated the ghettos.[i] Economic pressures in the late 1980s and early 1990s (largely due to Reagan’s exacerbation of unemployment rates amongst minority groups and dismantling of the welfare system) contributed to the proliferation of street gangs and the underground drugs economy in local urban environments. The routine racial profiling of young non-white males, the brutal beating of Rodney King by the LAPD in 1991 and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers involved furthered social unrest. Capitalising on and conveying the issues of disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as South Central (LA), gangsta rap artists, most famously NWA, detailed the systemic injustices faced by young racially marginalised males with political consciousness. Hollywood seized upon the popularity of gangsta culture following the success of gangsta rap in the form of the “ghetto action movie cycle” (a term popularised by cultural scholar S. Craig Watkins).[ii] *Boyz,* one of the most popular black films of the 1990s, can be considered a cultural product that illustrates this filmic cycle in a paradigmatic way.

2 Reflective of the increasing rates of gang membership, the spread of gangsta culture and public fascination with this cultural phenomenon, (black male) directors competitively commodified a sense of street and gang authenticity. Attracting a cross-racial audience, the subject proved lucrative in America's youth market, with *Boyz* earning more than $57 million domestically from a $6.5 million budget.[iii] Despite the critical and financial success of *Boyz,* the movie and the cycle more broadly generated criticism in part due to the representation of black women on-screen. Although rap and film are two very distinct forms and should be treated differently, the ghetto action movie cycle opened up debates that gangsta rap had previously. For black congresswoman Maxine Waters, whose district included South Central, gangsta rap was an urgent social critique; "a new art form to describe [inner-city youth's] pains, fears and frustrations."[iv] Conversely, African American civil rights activist and head of the National Political Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker asked "What do you think Dr. King would have to say about rappers calling black women bitches and whores?"[v] Violence and misogyny were seen by many (including Tucker, Vice President Dan Quayle and the FBI) to pervade gangsta rap, resulting in its attempted censure and efforts to "stop the wholesale marketing of this kind of music across America."[vi] By comparison, ghetto action movies were regulated with rating systems and despite screening (and being subjected to accusations of inciting) endless episodes of (black) male-on-male violence, they did not raise similar levels of controversy. However, the representation of black women in the filmic hood and the often misogynistic attitude of the black male characters towards them has stimulated much scholarly discussion.

3 The ghetto action cycle generated a significant amount of films and subsequent media and academic interest. Yet the cycle was relatively short-lived, with production tapering off in 1996 due to what film scholar Amanda Ann Klein terms as a public "exhaustion" with its projections of "violence, drugs, and gangs in African American neighbourhoods" (Klein 171). This was the same year that President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act underscoring declining sympathy to the plight of the poor and criminalised. The single black mother and her (violent) son purportedly no longer required (or deserved) government assistance and thus projections of their existence on screen decreased. In the late 1990s, interest waned in facets of gangsta culture as audience sympathies dwindled. By comparison, literature pertaining to the representation of black women and girls in *Boyz* has thrived and scholarship could itself be considered as somewhat exhaustive. Today, *Boyz* continues to make press headlines in part due to its twenty-five-year anniversary but also because the topics that sustained the ghetto action movie cycle, including systemic racial injustices against black urban youth, remain poignant.[vii] At a time when national conversation surrounding the on-going civil rights struggle is so intense, *Boyz* continues to speak to audiences – evidenced most obviously by the British Film Institute's re-release of Singleton's film in 2016 - suggesting that, despite widely different cultural periods, little has changed between past and present.[viii] The analysis of *Boyz* is particularly pertinent given the recent arrival in the black (male) hood and its problematic representation of black women and girls in *Dope* (2015) and *Straight Outta Compton* (*Compton*, 2015).

4 In returning to the cinematic hood in 2015, it is necessary and logical to revisit literature surrounding *Boyz* to assess if images of black women and girls have evolved in contemporary films. When the narrative is preoccupied with the black boys in the hood, are they still raised by their single black (angry) mothers and are young black women still

left to question "Who you callin' a hoe?"[ix] These questions will be answered through an examination of the representations of gender and race in all three films. The extent to which these depictions simply reproduce existing stereotypes of the filmic hood production trend is explored. This article will begin with a brief introduction to the films, before turning to an examination of the representation of black women and girls. Approaching these films through a gender, race, violence framework is arguably simplistic.[x] However, it continues to be a suitable theoretical lens through which to view these films.[xi] The Black Lives Matter movement (established 2015) and #OscarsSoWhite (2016) social media campaign have figured racial politics at the forefront of the public imagination, but black women and girls remain side-lined in conversations that are so focussed on "post-race."[xii] To consider this further, a range of press material pertaining to *Compton* and *Dope* has been sampled to evaluate how commentators handled the representation of black women and girls on screen. Press reception is important because it acts as a gatekeeper to public opinion, revealing if commentators considered the 2015 movies as new entities in their own right, suggesting diversity in representation, or as recyclers of the ghetto action cycle's conventions.[xiii]

5 Comparative analysis of Rick Famuyiwa's crime-comedy drama, *Dope,* and F. Gary Gray's biopic of NWA, *Compton,* has already pointed towards these two films' on-screen similarities. Sociologist Bernard Beck (2016) has briefly examined the presentation of the black male's exit from the ghetto and film reviewer and writer Aimee Knight has commented on the representation of women in these texts. Knight purports that both *Dope* and *Compton* project "hyper-sexualised depictions of women" resulting in "the same limiting, one-dimensional ideas about women on the periphery of hip hop."[xiv] This article agrees with Knight's claim to some extent but does suggest such a reading is more complex. Through further investigation into the constructions of gender, race and violence in these films, I illustrate how *Dope* and *Compton* rely on specific and problematic representations of black femininity that *Boyz* projected nearly twenty-five years previously. Fully aware of the traditions of the filmic black male hood and its treatment of black women and girls, the more recent movies could be rendered as simply regressive in their representational strategies. However, this would undermine the complexities and differences in *Boyz's*, *Compton's* and *Dope's* treatment of black women and girls. For these reasons – both the distinct differences and similarities in the representation of black femininity – these three films should be studied together, as the following section further illustrates.

2. The Hood Then and Now: An Introduction to *Boyz*, *Compton* and *Dope*

6 In the UK, the BBC's scheduling of *Boyz* - a film that Singleton reveals was "written for all of the NWA guys to be in" - one week after the UK cinematic release of *Compton* emphasizes the importance of Singleton's rendering of the hood today and its relationship to the cinematic hood in 2015.[xv] Removed from the ghetto action movies of the early 1990s temporally (in terms of production) *Compton* - beginning in 1986 but focussing largely on the early 1990s - returns to roughly the same time period of *Boyz*. *Boyz* begins in 1984 but is set primarily in 1991, while *Dope* details the lives of youths in 2015 obsessed with the early 1990s. All three films share spatial similarities in setting as black youth must navigate the seemingly dangerous hoods of LA; South Central (*Boyz*),

Compton (*Compton*) and "The Bottoms" neighbourhood in Inglewood (*Dope*). Gangs, guns and drugs continue to "plague" the streets in the 2015 screenings of the (male) hood with *Dope* updating the crack epidemic of *Boyz* and *Compton* to MDMA, or Molly. Drugs establish one of the many similarities of the three films, with Ice Cube providing another crucial link. In *Compton*, O'Shea Jackson Junior, in his portrayal of his father and NWA rapper Ice Cube, walks the violent ghetto streets (in almost a cyclical fashion) that Cube had twenty-four years previously in *Boyz*. Cube plays the character Doughboy in *Boyz* (a role commented upon in *Compton* (2.17.06)), is one of six producers and part subject of *Compton* and is the topic of *Dope's* protagonist / "geek" Malcolm's (Shameik Moore) initial essay application to Harvard University: "A Research Thesis to Discover Ice Cube's Good Day." Survival in and successful departure from the hood underpins the centrality of the black male experience in these three narratives.

7 *Boyz* and *Dope* very much establish the male coming-of-age story through respective protagonists Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Malcolm. The importance of the hood in establishing hypermasculine status and producing capital is encapsulated in *Compton*, a tale of NWA's rise to controversial fame. When asked how "Hollywood had changed in the time between *Boyz* and *Straight Outta Compton*," one of the early producers of *Compton*, Bill Strauss (who himself started his career as a production assistant on *Boyz*) hoped Hollywood had "come full circle" because the early 1990s "was a really exciting time" for filmmaking.[xvi] Despite Gray's previous contribution to the reappropriation of the all-male hood in the black female buddy film *Set It Off* (1996), the story of NWA undeniably results in revisiting not only the violence but more specifically the "bitches" that were so intrinsic to the lyrics of the gangsta rap group and the ghetto action movies of previous decades.[xvii] When thinking of *Dope* and the story he "wanted to tell," Famuyiwa (whose portfolio of work alongside *Dope's* narrator and producer, Forest Whittaker, often explores racial issues) considered films that influenced his childhood, including *Boyz*.[xviii] Together, *Boyz* and post-ghetto action cycle movies *Bottle Rocket* (1996) and *Boogie Nights* (1997) presented to Famuyiwa that "different" versions of "masculinity" could exist, something he wanted to further showcase in *Dope*.[xix]

8 For its director, *Dope* does not come "full circle" like *Compton*, but is instead directionally different to other films set in the hood, at least in terms of the representation of black males. Emphasising *Dope's* originality, reviewers have contended that the film examines the hood with "wit" (Caramanica, *New York Times*) as opposed to *Compton's* grit. There are also notable differences in budget and production values between the two films; *Compton* had a budget of $28 million, while *Dope* (produced outside of the Hollywood studio system unlike *Compton*) was a "low-seven figure movie" comparable to *Boyz's* budget.[xx] It is noteworthy that despite temporal (in terms of setting) and artistic differences, *Compton* and *Dope* have been marketed at the same audience. The movies were available to purchase as a double feature on GooglePlay despite originating from different production companies and distributors.[xxi] The packaging of *Compton* - the highest grossing film by a black director in history - with *Dope* suggests that these films should be consumed by the same audience.

9 Before moving into a detailed discussion of gender, I'll note here that although all three films were released at theatres with Rated-R status, NWA's narrative is also available on DVD in extended form with around twenty minutes of additional material in a Director's Cut edition.[xxii] The theatrical DVD release of *Compton* is accompanied by the extended version (on separate disk); the edition packaged with *Dope* by GooglePlay. Significantly,

the supplementary scenes that failed to make the theatrical release offer some of the most overtly sexualised scenes and conversely some of the most tender moments of NWA members' interactions with black women. For these reasons, I include references to such "deleted" episodes in this article after an examination of the gendered nature of the hood and a brief consideration of its academic attention.

3. (Re)Introduction to the Gendered Hood

10 The ghetto voices and bodies of black women in the highly gendered urban space of the ghetto action movie were often discarded or "Otherized" as negligent mothers, prostitutes, drugs addicts or side-lined girlfriends. They perform a very different function to the politically conscious or violent (young) man that we see in these films. The gendered discourse of the ghetto action movie cycle of the 1990s has been subject to much scholarly writing. In her 1991 discussion of the "New Ghetto Aesthetic," Jacquie Jones considers the "glaringly prominent" "standard rap treatment of women" as "bitches" and "hoes" in what she terms "homeboy cinema" (Jones 34) including *New Jack City* (1991) and *Boyz*. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade (2003) has since challenged the discussion of the African American woman as purely tangential and demeaning in what she labels *gangster* movies; *New Jack City* (1991), *Sugar Hill* (1994) and *Set It Off*. However, scholars, including Smith-Shomade, frequently render *gangsta* movies of the early 1990s (namely *Boyz*), and in particular their filmic representation of the black hood woman and girl, as problematic. At the same time, *Boyz* has been lauded for its critique of Reagan's America and praised for the depiction of a strong black father-son relationship in the characters of Tre (son) and Furious (father).[xxiii] Conversely, the positioning of Furious as positive role model and Tre as ambitious ghetto survivor has been identified by academics as detrimental to the black woman (and girl) who is reduced to an incapable observer rather than successful overseer of black family life.[xxiv]

11 When they are not mothers, black girls and women in *Boyz* (and the ghetto action movie more broadly) can be recognized as sexual gratifiers, (at times literally) silenced ghetto girls and / or morally virtuous and well-educated. Ultimately, however, they function as a restorer of masculinity, reinforcing historical ideas of the self-governing black woman as a hindrance to black men's masculinity.[xxv] Despite a preoccupation with boys in the hood in these three movies, black women (and girls) are crucial to *Boyz*, *Compton* and *Dope*. The filmic hood presents fewer black females than males but it is the presentation rather than the (lack of) presence of these characters that is problematic. Girlfriends continue to play a key role in today's hood while mothers are seemingly less essential. This is evidenced by the lack of discussion in the press sampled pertaining to the representation of mothers in the 2015 hood when compared to girlfriends and "bitches."[xxvi] Girlfriends and "bitches" are habitual characterisations of the hood girl, yet *Dope* delivers Diggy (Kiersey Clemons), a young black lesbian and one of Malcolm's best friends. Expanding the diversity of the traditionally heterosexual hood to include lesbian characters suggests progress which is not surprising, yet reverting to masculinised visions, the silencing of the female voice and flashing of female flesh is continually problematic. Female agency is further undermined in the hood film through the hypersexualisation of the black woman whose sexual performance is staged by and for the male gaze.

4. Hypersexual and Heterosexual Hoes and (Silent) Lesbians in the Hood

12 References to black "bitches" and "hoes" permeate *Boyz's* dialogue, stemming from gangsta rap's lexicon. Discussing ghetto legend and NWA member Eazy-E's "Boyz-n-The-Hood" (1987) from which the title of Singleton's film originated, Murray Forman contends:

> Musically, 'Boyz-n-The-Hood' is considered to have done little to advance the genre aesthetically. Yet, in its uncompromising linguistic turns and startling descriptions of homeboy leisure (involving beer, 'bitches', and violence), it was riveting and offered a new hardcore funky model for masculine identification in hip hop. (Forman 77)

13 While initially "riveting," such masculine identification quickly became saturated with what cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson recognises as "the standard linguistic currency that young black males often use to demonstrate their authentic machismo" (Dyson 132). Machismo is achieved in part through the conflating of black women into one "indistinguishable whole" (Dyson 132) using "bitch," "hoe" and "slut" amongst other demeaning epithets. The black "bitch" of gangsta recapitulated derogatory language used to refer to black women that existed on-screen during the explosion of blaxploitation movies in the 1970s, including Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972). It is a film that cultural scholar Eithne Quinn (2010) states "demands recognition for it is full of black agency and enterprise, as well as exploitative dynamics" (Quinn 105). It is also a blaxploitation film that, much like *Shaft* (1971) and *The Mack* (1973), positions black women as "peripheral yet primary sexual objects" (Dunn 73) and as "bitches."

14 In *Dope*, Malcolm receives a copy of Parks's *Superfly* from his (in Malcolm's words) "clichéd" absent black father (1.20 - 1.30). Attached to the film is the note, "Happy Birthday Son, my favourite movie." Such inclusion of the "only memory of his father" suggests the parodying of blaxploitation in which black women's subjectivity is readily considered a generic trait. For Dennis Rome, black women in blaxploitation were "not only marginalized" but "seen only as sexual beings and only when they are in the presence of men" (Rome 90). However, others have recognised that blaxploitation is much more complex than such a statement suggests. For example, the titular character of *Coffy* (1973) played by Pam Grier could be seen to afford some black women with images of empowerment. Consulting bell hooks's (1992) ideas on black women spectators, Yvonne Sim's contends that "African American women can adopt an oppositional gaze when viewing images that are painful to watch" (Sims 28) in blaxploitation. Audiences can instead "identify with traits of an empowered woman" (Sims 28) in figures such as Coffy. The black "bitches" of blaxploitation and their bodies were often used to draw in audiences, particularly in the figure of Coffy. Quinn (2012) notes how Coffy's breasts were "heavily exploited in the film's promotional materials" (Quinn 281). At the same time, Quinn argues that "Coffy's sexual spectacle is instrumental to the narrative: the display of her breasts and the many seduction scenes are repeatedly put to the service of disarming and defeating male wrongdoers" (Quinn 282). In all three films considered herein, some black women and girls offer moments of strength that circumvent subjectivity. Yet unlike *Coffy*, the (hyper)sexualising of the black women's body is incidental rather than instrumental to the narrative.

15 Women of various races are a source of masturbation in *Dope's* narrative. We witness Malcolm in his bedroom (a space accessorized with Eazy-E and NWA records) pleasuring himself whilst watching videos of women "twerking" (a dance style that has its origins in African American culture) on his mobile phone (14.03). Reviewing the film for the *New York Times*, Jon Caramanica recognises the scene as a "nod" to ghetto action movie *Juice* (1992). For Caramancia, *Dope* offered "an answer to, a repudiation of, a reconciliation with the streetwise black cinema of the early 1990s, films like "Juice," "Boyz N the Hood," "Menace II Society" and more."[xxvii] Such a statement suggests cinematic evolution, but the black women of *Dope* are neglected in Caramancia's review. On the first sighting of Malcolm's love interest, Nakia (Zoe Kravitz), Jib (Malcolm's other best friend) contends "all I wanna do is zoom zoom zoom in the boom boom boom" (2.10). Later, Nakia is said to have "metaphorically showed you [Malcolm] her pussy and said come fuck me" (13.32). Following this, Malcolm returns to his phone and masturbation. The hypersexualisation of young black women was not discussed in *Dope*'s press reception, perhaps unsurprising because the "predominant media representations of Black women often illustrate racially-stereotyped, highly-sexualised images" (Coleman et al 1). By comparison, the press sampling of *Compton*, in which (semi)naked black bodies are far more prevalent, revealed that hypersexualisation was a frequent, but often fleeting, topic of conversation (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, *New Yorker*, *New York Times*) and occasionally tied in with a discussion of rap's misogyny (*Daily Beast*).

16 The long history of the hypersexualising of the black female body has repeatedly rendered her as disposable, a notion stemming from slave holding days. As Katie Hogan notes, "the fantasy of the wanton black female temptress was created by white men and women as a rationalization of the repeated mass rapes of black women by white men during and after slavery" (Hogan 107). The public displaying of Saartjie Baartman in the nineteenth century, paraded in Europe under the name Hottentot Venus, underpins the fascination with the black female body and its sexualisation. Harris-Perry (2011) recognizes similar discourse in the "public dissection of Michelle Obama into body parts - first her butt and then her arms" which is "reminiscent" (Harris-Perry 279) of Baartman's treatment. "Issues of hypersexuality," Harris writes, "lurk in the media obsession with Michelle's body" (Harris-Perry 277). While white women are similarly subjected to bodily scrutiny, race remains crucial in this treatment: "Apprehension over whether Obama is suitably attired is underscored by observations that Jacqueline Kennedy's sleeveless dress did not cause a similar controversy" (McAlister 313).

17 To situate the sexualisation and public dissection of the black female body purely through the lens of slavery would be reductive as would the suggestion that only whites would derive pleasure from such images. Terms such as "bitch," "hoe" and "slut," continue to permeate rap and pop culture but have since been reclaimed by female artists and celebrities. From rappers such as Lil Kim ("Queen Bitch") and Nicki Minaj ("Baddest Bitch") to "slut-walk" organiser, model and entrepreneur Amber Rose (*How to be a Bad Bitch*), such terminology has been used in a bid to take ownership of the traditionally demeaning expressions.[xxviii] Examining the songs of female rappers between 1992 and 2000, Matthew Oware notes that for artists "such as Trina and Missy Elliot, the word ["bitch"] denotes a positive and strong woman who is no nonsense," (Oware 796) an idea that can similarly be applied to the "bad bitch" of blaxploitation. The use of "bad bitch" by black female rappers presents the artist as empowered, in control and "as the best at their craft" (Oware 796). Yet despite finding "several songs" in his sample "that are

ostensibly empowering to women," Oware contends that "the message of female upliftment and empowerment becomes effaced by female self-exploitation and hyperobjectification" (Oware 789). While self-exploiting, the sexualising of the self by women such as Minaj also produces capital from the fascination with the curvaceous black female body and buttocks. The black porn industry has similarly capitalised on the hypersexualised female figure, arguably displaying black women's sexual empowerment and complicating the boundaries of the liberation / objectification dichotomy. The same argument can be made of the white porn industry. However, it is significant that in *Compton*, the viewing of black porn (57.50 – 58.28) by NWA member DJ Yella (who in real life later produced and directed adult porn, including "hood-themed" titles *H.W.A: Ho's with Attitude* and *Str8 Outta Compton 1* and *2*) is cut from the theatrical release.[xxix] Two of the most overtly sexualised images, the watching of porn and the observing of two (silent) black women kissing while one receives oral sex (1.56.56), were cut remaining only on the extended edition. This suggests that the scenes were not deemed necessary, or suitable (given the rating system), for wider audiences. To include such scenes in the theatrical release would amplify the film's reliance on the hypersexual black women's body but to exclude such scenes is itself problematic as the sexualised black female body is once again a throwaway.

18 The literal throwing of a half-naked black woman's body off a bed in *Straight Outta Compton* by Eazy-E (58.36 – 1.00.35) reinforces such sentiment. The intertextual referencing to Gray's 1995 film *Friday* (featuring Ice Cube) through the phrase "Bye, Felicia" further reinscribes the uniform treatment of the black female body. Used in *Friday* to render a person insignificant and unworthy of engagement, significantly a black female, Gray confirms "The audience goes crazy at" its inclusion in *Compton*.[xxx] Rejuvenated on social media through memes and hashtags in 2015, "Bye, Felicia" is inserted in *Compton* when a naked black woman is locked out of NWA's hotel room where numerous other bare black female bodies remain (1.01.16). When questioned about the episode by writer Allison P. Davis who found the scene's gendered politics concerning, Gray responded, "We should be focusing on how the police are treating innocent American citizens, let's talk about something as important, if not more important, if you really want to go there."[xxxi] For Gray, the inclusion of "Bye, Felicia" did not warrant critical opinion; it was simply a mid-production suggestion of Ice Cube's portrayer and real life son O'Shea Jackson Jr.: it was a "little extra coincidental joke."[xxxii] The joke purportedly functioned in the same capacity as the naked black woman / "hoe;" as something / someone to disregard and express amusement at, rather than acknowledge as a person. The character of Lily in *Dope* similarly operates on the same level. Played by Victoria Secrets model Chanel Iman, Lily is presented as sexually mature when compared to virgin Malcolm, as she instructs him to take off his shirt: "Will you play with me my little boy from the hood?" she asks (41.30). After her consumption of MDMA she appears topless, vomits on Malcolm's face and urinates in public (47.50 – 48.20). Her brief character appearance is nothing more than a source of humour.

19 Generating laughs at the expense of degrading black women is a feature of *Boyz*. Tre has been successfully reared by his black father and consequentially displays a degree of (performed) chivalry. In one scene (33.55 - 34.10) Tre suggests that the young black males should "act like gentlemen" and "let these ladies eat first" at a barbeque. Doughboy (Ice Cube), who has been brought up in a single-headed female household and who has recently been released from prison responds, "Let the ladies eat. Hoes gotta eat too."

Singleton allows the young women to answer back, through the character of Shalika (Regina King). She acts as a mouthpiece for the "hoes," questioning "Who you callin' a hoe? I ain't no hoe." The rhetoric is comparable to hip-hop artist Queen Latifah's 1993 Grammy award winning record "U.N.I.T.Y" in which she rhetorically and repeatedly asks "Who you callin' a bitch?" Doughboy's reply, "Oops, I'm sorry, bitch" is reprimanded by his mother (Tyra Ferrell) who tells him to "watch his mouth" while his male friends provide background and backyard laughter. As cultural scholar Gwendolyn Pough notes, it is Shalika's "ignorance that we are made to feel is so amusing" (Pough 133).

20 Doughboy contends that he's "just playing," however, his vocabulary frequently relies on the same denouncing language. Shalika once more questions Doughboy's mentality in a later scene (1.05.18 - 1.06.00); "Why every time you talk about a female you gotta call say "bitch" or "hoe" or "hoochie"?" Doughboy simply contends "Cos that's what you are." While Doughboy declares that you "Can't learn shit talkin' to no stupid ass bitch," Shalika provides poignant, if fleeting, thought-provoking moments. Despite Pough's contention that her character is "virtually silenced" (Pough 133), Shalika stimulates thought rather than erections with statements such as "How you know God's a he? He could be a she, you don't know that." Yet Doughboy's response reinforces gendered distinctions, "If God was a bitch there wouldn't be no nuclear bombs, no war" because it "isn't in a bitch's nature," diminishing Shalika's contention and suggesting that her voice has no real place in the hood. Indeed, her status is never fully obvious; she hangs out with Doughboy but it is not clear if she is in fact Doughboy's girlfriend or friend. When in prison, Doughboy spends time writing to his "girl" but it is not made explicit if this is in fact Shalika. Such an unclear position is reflected in the limited critical attention given to Shalika; she cannot be explicitly tied down as a tangential girlfriend nor does she confirm notions of the hypersexualised black female body. Her character complicates the "bitch" / "hoe" or mother image that scholars have recognised in the hood film and thus the marginalisation of the young black woman continues as she is often neglected in scholarly analysis. Despite this, what is made plain is that Shalika's character is very much established in relation to Doughboy. Moreover, her ability to articulate sophisticated thinking is interspersed with the use of "Nigger" and she is the only young woman shown drinking alcohol; she is what Pough terms as the "low-end" (Pough 133) ghetto girl.

21 Such grading of black women caused controversy during *Compton's* 2014 casting call which was deemed to "conflate black skin with unattractiveness" (Stutz). In a widely circulated online call by Sande Allesi Casting, African American girls were placed in categories with "B GIRLS" defined as "fine girls, long natural hair, really nice bodies. Small waists, nice hips. You should be light-skinned. Beyoncé is a prototype here."[xxxiii] "D GIRLS" by comparison were "African American girls. Poor, not in good shape. Medium to dark skin tone." The alphabetical labelling system can be read as a simple means of breaking down different requirements. However, for others, the differences between categorisations and skin tone were more than coincidental and incited accusations of racism from the public. Responding to the criticism that surfaced in the media and on the casting company's Facebook post, Kristan Berona (a white female casting director) of Sande Alessi wrote (via Facebook) "I would like to sincerely apologize for recently posting a casting announcement that used offensive language to recruit women for a film our agency is working on."[xxxiv]

22 Universal Pictures similarly recognised the offensiveness of the casting call that implicitly placed black women against one another in a competition of bodily aesthetics. The company issued a statement to the *Hollywood Reporter*: "Universal Pictures and the filmmakers for 'Straight Outta Compton' did not approve and do not condone the information in this casting notice. We regret and sincerely apologize for being in any way associated with the offensive descriptions it contained."[xxxv] The casting call was not a topic of discussion in the press sampled post-*Compton's* release; the controversy it first aroused had seemingly been forgotten a year later. The defining of black women's bodies by (stereo)type runs across all three films. Shalika is in one sense "low grade" because she drinks and swears and is thus masculinised to a certain extent. She is therefore the only young woman allowed to cruise with the boys in the hood.

23 Moving into the twenty-first century (male) hood, the masculinisation of black girls and women becomes more explicit. While (presumable) "B GIRLS" that met the casting criteria of *Straight Outta Compton* fill pool party scenes (1.25.45), sometimes wearing bikinis but often naked, one scene includes an unnamed (darker skinned) lesbian in a recording studio who begins to pull out a gun on Dr. Dre (Dre, Corey Hawkins) during an altercation. The gun holding woman (unreferenced in the press sampled) is dressed in baggy jeans (an aesthetic often considered to have transitioned from the (male) prison to the streets). She also wears a plaid shirt (a familiar gangsta style also worn and teamed with jeans by the butch Lesbian Cleo (Queen Latifah) in Gray's *Set It Off* in which Dre featured) while another black woman sits on her lap. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the "gangsta" styled woman's dialogue, "And may the West Coast reign forever" as she points her (phallic) weapon (2.13.11), is removed from the final cut. Instead, in cliché fashion, she is seen but not heard in the theatrical release, reaching for her firearm, an action curtailed by the figure of record producer and music executive, Suge Knight. While the placing of the firearm in the female hand reappropriates the phallocentricity of the gun, her masculinisation, much like Cleo's, ultimately defeminises her.

24 Conventional heterosexuality, both female and male, is well-established in Singleton's *Boyz* where homosexuals are absent from the hood. Treating heterosexuality with a degree of humour in *Dope*, the character Will Sherwood, a white college acquaintance of Malcolm's, declares that he has had anal and oral sex with girls. He has not however had vaginal sex, leading him to (wittily) question if he is "technically gay" (1.00.25). Played by the comedian Blake Anderson, Will's character relieves the hood of its heterosexual seriousness to a degree, but he still achieves his "dream" of "having sex with a black girl." The boys in the hood, namely Malcolm, who is black and of the hood rather than Will who is white and visits the hood, similarly desires sexual stimulation, and their heterosexual status is made plain. Similarly in *Compton*, black women are draped over the beds of NWA members' hotel rooms confirming the black male's heterosexuality.

25 *Compton* does momentarily disrupt the heterosexual hood, as noted, but this fails to produce progressive images of the lesbian female. Destabilising heterosexuality in *Dope* is achieved through the character of Diggy. In case of any doubt, the viewer is informed by Whitaker's narration that Diggy is a lesbian: "Although by the way she dresses you might not be able to tell she's a girl." Yet the baggy pants and shirt combination of *Compton* are replaced with a more fitted style that costume designer Patrik Milani states derived from 1990s R&B artist Aaliyah, who he considered "very feminine although she wore oversized men's clothes."[xxxvi] Diggy's clothing, much like contemporary street gang members'

reappropriation of baggy pants, is intrinsic to establishing her emerging identity against a backdrop of oppression. The attempt by Diggy's family to put her in a pink dress and heterosexual mindset by praying away her gayness generates amusement among herself and her friends (2.48 – 3.08). While handling the subject with humour, *Dope* raises serious topics for discussion. That actress Kiersey Clemons was contacted by numerous young girls via social media declaring that "I've never been able to see myself on screen and I was able to watch you and feel like I was watching myself," illustrates the ongoing absence of young black lesbians on screen.[xxxvii] Such a shortage is confirmed by Aneeka Henderson who comments on how "The film industry as a whole persists in its marginalization of black lesbian protagonists on screen and directors behind the camera" (Henderson 146). Indeed, despite audiences being able to see Diggy, her voice is limited.

26 At a time when audiences can instantly communicate with actresses, actors and directors over social media and where the characters of *Dope* demonstrate technological awareness and advancement through the use of bit coin to conceal the selling of MDMA, gender politics on screen are surprisingly regressive. Diggy, like Shalika, offers moments of profound substance, including an episode in which she expresses her discomfort with Will referring to her as "nigger" (1.01.35 – 1.03.40). The use of the word by non-blacks continually attracts media coverage as does the discussion of its usage in popular culture, and it is Diggy who sets in motion this (brief) conversation.[xxxviii] Ultimately, however, she is "outvoted by her peers," in the words of Will, and her opinion silenced. Diggy is often left to articulate her thought purely through facial expressions or physical actions rather than through speech. According to A.O. Scott (*New York Times*) Malcolm and his friends are "defiant counterstereotypes" in a review that references *Boyz* and ghetto action movie *Menace II Society* (1993).[xxxix] In the same article, Scott contends "The movie isn't heavily invested in its female characters, sticking to a basic template: There are [sic] a good bad girl, a bad bad girl, a buddy and a mom." Scott's review champions the progression of boys in the hood, and much like his reading of the film does not invest in further critique of the roles ascribed to black women. While I propose a more complex reading of black women in *Dope*, Scott's sentiment regarding the film's lack of investment in their representation can be partially supported.

27 In one scene (2.30), Diggy places her tongue against the cover of Miami based black hip-hop group 2 Live Crew's double platinum album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* (1989). It is an album which featured in Gray's *Next Friday* (the 2000 sequel to *Friday*) and included songs such as "The Fuck Shop," "Dick Almighty," and "Bad Ass Bitch." The record's artwork also pictured four bikini-clad black women. The album was deemed obscene and illegal to sell by a Federal court: the ultimate example of censorship and silencing of rap.[xl] With the black male voice taking centre-stage in hip-hop (despite a number of successful female artists), gangsta rap and the male hood film, it is instead the black female voice that is suppressed here in *Dope* as Diggy makes only gestures with her tongue. In the words of Cassandra Jackson, "black men often hold the trump card over black women and privilege black male victimization at the expense of addressing misogyny" (Jackson 8). The positioning of race above gender results in the continuing repression of the female voice in *Dope*.

28 *Dope* has been said to bring comedy to the 90s hood movie, disrupting its clichés through humour. *Empire* (Ian Freer) reviewed *Dope* as " A smart riposte to the 'hood drama stereotype. *Dope* is funny, stylish and mostly exuberant fun" while *The Wall Street Journal* (Caryn James) contended that "'Dope' Finds Teenage Humor in the 'Hood."[xli] To illustrate

this, Malcolm and Jib laugh at the proximity of Diggy's tongue to the 2 Live album cover, which could be considered as literally "tongue-in-cheek." Critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw observes that 2 Live Crew's objective and defence was "ridiculing the stereotypes" (Crenshaw 259); to imbue stereotypes of blacks with comedic value through lyrics. Yet as Crenshaw astutely recognises, "sexual humour in which women are objectified as packages of bodily parts to serve whatever male-bonding/male competition the speakers please subordinates women in much the same way that racist humor subordinates African Americans" (Crenshaw 261). To laugh at Diggy positioning her tongue next to an album which includes songs in which "black women are cunts, bitches, and all purpose "hos"" (Crenshaw 255) diminishes the reality of black women's subordination beyond pop culture products. Interpreting *Dope* in an alternative (and more positive) light is, however, simultaneously possible.

29 Diggy's tomboy-esque appearance leads her to reveal her breasts to black male club bouncers who (in control of the venue's "nigger to hoe ratio") declare that Malcolm, Jib and Diggy will only gain entry if they "have pussys" (14.17 – 15.20). Diggy's exposure of her chest (unseen by the audience and thus generating little interest in the press sampled) leads the bouncers to exclaim, "This little nigger's a bitch, like *Boys Don't Cry*." Diggy's actions repeat an act performed by Sojouner Truth in 1858. According to Cooper, "white male detractors" attempted to "humiliate and discredit" Truth "by calling her gender into question" (Cooper 39) resulting in Truth baring her breasts. In *Dope* it is black men who attempt to humiliate Diggy rather than the white men who sought to shame Truth. The repeated exposure of her chest suggests a continuing lack of progression in relationships between men and women but further highlights the subordination of black women by black men as evident in *Nasty*. Indeed, Cooper writes, "Nineteenth-century African American intellectuals understood that the struggle for black freedom and humanity would never be a disembodied process as long as black women had to bare their breasts to prove they were women" (Cooper 39). Diggy's bearing of her breasts to verify her gender confirms the ongoing dehumanisation of the black female body, accentuated by the rendering of Diggy as a "bitch" by the bouncer. Diggy's lack of dialogue in this scene when compared to her earlier discussion of the use of the racial epithet with Will again suggests that in *Dope*, race is figured as more important than gender. Diggy eagerly engaged in a discussion regarding racial politics but she fails to voice any concern surrounding gender politics. At the same time, her character offers alternative readings.

30 In a scene in which Diggy says very little, the decision not to fully engage in conversation can be recognised and celebrated as a conscious reversal of the historical silencing of the (black) female voice. In 1893 at the World Congress of Representative Women, Anna Julia Cooper articulated how "the white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation; black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent." While speech disrupts this power dynamic, self-defined silence also conveys power; Diggy's character chooses not to engage with men who question, and then belittle her. References by the bouncers to *Boys Don't Cry*, an Academy Award Winning 1999 film based on the violent death of Brandon Teena - an American transgender man raped and murdered in 1993 - are unworthy of Diggy's time. She ignores the bouncers' derogatory comments and simply states, "What the fuck, let us in." Referencing *Boys Don't Cry* in *Dope's* narrative exposes the insensitivity of the (offensive) bouncer who imbues the reference with his own laughter, rather than such comments generating comedic value for other characters. Diggy only communicates at length with those who offer her mutual respect; best friends

Malcolm and Jib. Here, Diggy offers (arguable) progression to the hood girls mapped elsewhere.

31 Diggy is loyal to Malcolm and her position is firmly secured as buddy rather than the "bitch" or hypersexual "hoe" of *Boyz* or *Compton* although this in part stems from her sexual orientation. But Diggy does offer a new dimension to the gendered hood when other characters, such as Lily, revert to former stereotypical roles. As the following discussion reveals, girlfriends and potential girlfriends of the hood fail to conform to the "bitch," "hoe," or lesbian role but are recognisable for their educational aspiration and stability. The latter is something that black mothers are often seemingly incapable of providing in a chaotic, violent environment. By examining the representation of black mothers and girlfriends in the hood, the dependence on stable and interrelated images of black femininity is made further obvious.

6. Angry and Grieving Black Mothers and Educated Girlfriends

32 The mothers of *Boyz* have attracted much scholarly attention because they have been presented as black women who are unable to successfully raise young black males in the hood. Michelle Tracy Berger identifies "three images of mothers" (Berger 99) in *Boyz*. The first mother is "the upwardly mobile Reva (Angela Basset)," (Berger 99) Tre's mother who uproots her young son (who has been involved in school fights) to live with his father while she pursues a Master's degree and financial stability. The second, Doughboy and Ricky's mother, is "the mean Mrs. Baker who calls her son [Doughboy] a "fat fuck" (Berger 99) and the third, Cheryl, a heroin user (like hood dweller Caine's mother in *Menace II Society*) who actively seeks drugs in exchange for oral sex, leaving her baby to wander into roads (35.15). Cheryl, who features only intermittently, is presented as a careless mother, desperate for drugs but uninterested in caring for her child. She is the welfare queen prototype consumed by laziness.

33 Cheryl's neglect of her child situates her as an unconcerned mother, who rather than being forced to abandon her children, chooses to do so. At the time of *Boyz's* release, the recirculation of this characterisation of carelessness had gained broader momentum. Black mothers and welfare queens were routinely vilified in order to generate support for welfare cuts. Jeanette Covington notes how viewers were "urged" to see *Boyz* as it "repeated conservative mantra that unduly generous welfare payments produced the female-headed households that churned out these young, violent, fatherless black males" (Covington 66). Bullet penetrated posters of Reagan's 1984 campaign places political responsibility for the plight of the black male at the hands of his administration in *Boyz*. But the black mother is equally blamed for her failing personal responsibility at home.

34 The presence of the black mother in *Boyz* is damaging to the black male, while her absence, as illustrated by Tre's mother Reeva, enables the father to instil a moral conscience in his offspring. Tre, fully loaded and ready to shoot in an attempt to avenge his friend's death, ultimately chooses not to engage in the film's climatic shootout. By comparison, Doughboy contends that his mother "loved that fool more than she loved me" in reference to his brother, Ricky, who dies as a consequence of gang violence. This leads Doughboy to fire bullets and contributes to the mass incarceration of young black males in the early 1990s. Mrs. Baker fails to raise either of her young boys successfully,

with Ricky dead and Doughboy imprisoned. Dyson perceptively suggests that, Singleton "on tough and touchy ground," correlates Doughboy's misogyny with "maternal mistreatment and neglect" (Dyson 131). His "misogyny," Dyson continues, "is clearly the elaboration of a brooding and extended resentment, a deeply festering wound to his pride that infects his relationships with every woman he encounters" (Dyson 131). The literally wounded male is visible in the blood spurting body of Ricky (1.24.59 – 1.26.40), but the physical wound of the black mother manifests itself as a psychological wound that not only leads Doughboy to deem girls as "bitches" but makes him incapable of holding fire. Ultimately the "angry" Mrs. Baker is unable to raise Doughboy, resulting in the (penal) state taking control of him.

35 The angry black woman, a character first popularised in the 1930s radio broadcast and later televised character of Sapphire Stevens in *Amos 'n' Andy*, was revisited in early 1990s popular culture and continues to be a stereotype and accusation of black women today; political commentator Bill O'Reilly openly endorsed such characterisation of Michelle Obama stating, "She looks like an angry black woman."[xlii] Mrs. Baker exemplifies this role in *Boyz* as she verbally and physically abuses Doughboy. The part is seemingly reprised by Dre's mother, Verna (Lisa Renee Pitts) in *Compton*. The Sapphire "identity" hooks (1982) informs us "has been projected on to any black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger and rage about her lot" (hooks 86). In her first scene (6.44 – 8.25), Verna criticises Dre for his inability to attend a job interview she arranged for him. She declares "I have worked my ass off to get us here and I refuse to let you throw it all away." Such a statement rebuffs the representation of the black mother as careless. However, Verna who "runs the house" is instead positioned as the angry black woman; anger that she verbalises and physically enacts against Dre. Verna slaps Dre across the face telling him to "shut up," a scene reminiscent of the altercation between Doughboy and his mother after Ricky's death. However, Dre's determination to provide for his mother through producing profitable music illustrates how important she and her work ethic are. Verna could then be considered as what Sheri Parks (2010) terms a "strong black woman" rather than an "angry black woman." The "strong (sometimes angry) black woman" exhibits anger that is "not out of control; it is strategic" (Parks 110). Although Mrs. Baker's (*Boyz*) anger against Doughboy can be recognised as a response to the plights of her sons, her anger does not encourage any positive change in circumstance. Verna's anger encourages Dre to succeed and so is beyond the simplistic angry black woman construction. At the same time, her anger attempts to control Dre's actions and so is continually problematic.

36 The importance of mothers, or perhaps the reality of black female-headed households in urban neighbourhoods in the 1980s (39.6% of urban households were headed by black females in 1980 compared to 12.8 of white female headed households), leads Eazy-E (Jason Mitchell) to threaten a drug dealer's mother in the opening few minutes of the film (3.45). [xliii] But NWA members' mothers besides Verna and Ice Cube's - who makes a brief appearance alongside his father - are distinctly absent. This could be a simple reflection of life on the road as NWA are shown travelling across the country from recording studios, hotel rooms and concert venues. Indeed, Cube's father is just as peripheral as his mother. However, the suggestion is that in a biopic concerned with the rise of these young black artists to fame, the depiction of sexually serving "bitches" and "hoes" is integral to the conveying of the young men's success and *Compton's* cinematic vision. Mothers on the other hand, who do not fulfil this sexualised function, are represented as neither wholly detrimental nor influential to this achievement, unlike figures such as rap

artist Tupac's mother, Afeni Shaku, who he lyrically lauded.[xliv] The black mother is depreciated in the filmic hood despite her "real life" importance. In *Boyz*, Furious's presence enables Tre to pursue an educational route out of the hood to Morehouse College in Atlanta, a historically black educational institution whose notable alumni includes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tre is raised by Furious which rejects the notion of the black failing / absent father and enables the black mother to be vilified despite the reality that they were often the ones heading up households.

37 Malcolm's single mother has a greater, but still peripheral, presence in *Dope* at a time when black female-headed households nationwide continue to be three times higher than white female-headed households.[xlv] Lisa (Kimberly Elise) is a bus driver and despite her single parent status has raised an intelligent young man in the hood without gang affiliation and with ambition, like Tre. Lisa fails to conform to the mother images seen in *Boyz* and *Compton.* She is neither overbearing and angry nor careless and drug dependent. Because of her limited time on-screen, she cannot be categorised as the "good woman" either. For Berger the "good woman" is "typified as upwardly mobile, educated and sexually virtuous" (Berger 96). In *Boyz*, this role is performed by Tre's girlfriend, Brandi, who joins Tre in his academic aspiration. Brandi's character, a Catholic who attempts to study for exams while surrounded by gunshots (1.09.08), highlights the limited space available for the enactment of black girlhood (and the black male hood film's dependence on corresponding and stable representations of black femininity), as girls enact women's roles. For Pough, Brandi is the "high end of the ghetto trio" (Pough 133) of girls, the antithesis to Shalika. Brandi wants to go to college before she is married, and wants to be married before she has sex, a desire that is not fulfilled.

38 Brandi is educated (like Tre's mother) and fails to conform to the "bitch" / "hoe" dichotomy. Instead "her purpose" is "to renew Tre's manhood" (Pough 132). Tre, racially abused by a black police officer (a scene that is almost replicated by Gray and illustrates generational and class divisions amongst the black community and suggests systemic racism within the LAPD), returns to Brandi's house stating that he is "tired of this shit" (1.09.40 – 1.14.43). Breaking down in front of Brandi, Tre reveals that he "never thought I'd be crying in front of a female." Like Doughboy, Tre is vulnerable but this vulnerability stems from institutional racism and state power. Witnessing Tre's distress, Brandi then retracts her previous statements pertaining to celibacy until matrimony and has sex with him. Tre's fragility is remedied by his sexual performance with Brandi; the "good woman" reinstates the black man's masculinity while Doughboy is left to re-establish his manliness through the shooting of the phallic gun. *Dope* similarly employs the trope of the "good woman" through the character of Nakia, a teenager who is preparing for her GED exams and, with the help of Malcolm's mathematical intellect, aspires to attain an educational future.

39 In one sense, Nakia confirms Malcolm's intelligence in *Dope* and positions the male as intellectually superior as he teaches her mathematics. But Nakia also challenges Malcolm's thought process in terms of the way in which he views her. Malcolm accuses Nakia of putting her "feminine wiles" on him on behalf of her ex-boyfriend. She responds "And here I was, stupid enough to think that you were different" (1.14.00). Despite not attending prom with Malcolm, Nakia does ultimately thank him for aiding her in passing her GED exams. She kisses him on the cheek before the narrative's closing (1.32.48), implying that a relationship will materialise between the two. Aspirational girls such as Nakia and Brandi serve to illustrate that the black male is vulnerable, whether that stems

from police mistreatment or the threat of other (more violent) boys in the hood and as girlfriends they allow the black male to validate his talents, sexual or otherwise.

40 In all three films, there are black women and girls who are presented as either formally or informally educated. In *Compton* Eazy-E's girlfriend and later wife (and widow) Tomica Woods-Wright (Carra Patterson) "knows the business;" a notion rooted in reality as she gained insight into the music industry from her position as assistant to Motown Chairman, Clarence Avant. Tomica organises Eric's debts and accounts, something that Eazy-E is incapable of doing himself. Now owner and CEO of Ruthless Records after inheriting the company after Eazy-E's death in 1995, Tomica was the only female producer of *Compton* and was hugely important to production because of her rights to NWA's music. According to one of the film's early producers, Bill Strauss, "We were determined to make this movie happen and we were determined to bring Tomica into the fold." To do so:

> Leigh and co-writer Alan Wenkus would change the script to add more dimension to Eazy's character. The idea was to draw Eazy in a light that would do justice to his legacy to win over Tomica. We also made her a more important character in the film than she initially was.[xlvi]

41 Such an admission is evident in Tomica's characterisation. While Eric has street knowledge, Tomica is illustrated as possessing business knowledge. Tomica discovers Eazy-E's business partner and manager Jerry Heller's fraudulent activity causing Heller to reduce Tomica to a "groupie assistant." "Did she even go to college?" he asks (2.20.50). Heller has declared that such comments violate a 1999 non-disparagement agreement between himself and Woods-Wright, an agreement that indicates Tomica's awareness of the importance of her public image.[xlvii] This question posed by Heller remains unanswered in the film, but despite Eazy-E responding that "it ain't love" as he maintains his gangsta persona, Eric Wright as partner, rather than Eazy-E as gangsta rapper, tells Tomica that he loves her (2.07.27). In an earlier scene, Eric holds Tomica's hand in bed (1.51.50). This occurs just after he has been brutally beaten under the instruction of Suge Knight (1.48.07) and his vulnerability, this time not at the hands of the state or maternal negligence, is exposed.

42 Comparisons can be drawn here with the on-screen treatment of Brandi after the placing of a gun to Tre's head by the racist police officer. However, Eric and Tomica do not have sex (at any point in the film) to restore Eric to the "hard-man" Eazy-E, they simply lay together. A year before his death, Eazy-E told *Jet* magazine that Tomika was a "kind and a wonderful mother. We have a little boy who's a year old. Before Tomika, I had other women. I have seven children by six different mothers."[xlviii] These children are absent in the film, cultivating an image of Eric as a dedicated partner to Tomica who is certainly depicted as a "kind" person, particularly in the scene post-Eric's beating. The removal of scenes in which Eric and Tomica go on their first date and the exclusion of the couple marrying at Eric's deathbed in the theatrical release (2.31.44), makes the image of Eric and Tomica holding hands as she embraces him, the most demonstrative moment of affection between male and female partners in the narrative. Without the necessity to include Tomica in production, her image on-screen by an all-male production team would have perhaps been distinctly different, if at all present according to Strauss.

43 The presence of Tomica behind the screen is crucial to her filmic representation; she assumes a supportive but not sexualised role. Explaining the importance of women's "behind-the-camera participation" in exploitation movies, Quinn (2012) notes how

actress Pam Grier's off-screen "contributions ultimately furnished her with some determination over what became her iconic leading role" (Quinn 271), Coffy. Tomica's participation is similarly decisive in her presentation but her producer position does not eradicate all the throwaway black women's bodies fundamental to NWA's lyrics and money making success. Tomica, like Cube's wife and Dre's girlfriend in the film, offer stability to their partners whose maturity from boys in the hood to men in the music industry is illustrated by their transition from "bitches" and "hoes" to steady relationships. Whether true-to-life representation or invented scenario the exposed vulnerability of Eric's beaten body establishes the literal and figurative softer side of the boys while Tomica is presented as essential (as she was to production) and not disposable to Eric and the business.[xlix] Although these girlfriends and wives offer support, they like the mothers of the boys from the hood, cannot curtail violence.

44 Reel black mothers are left grieving the loss of their sons in 1991 (Ricky in *Boyz*) as real life black mothers today mourn the death of their sons, including Freddie Gray who died while in police custody in Baltimore in 2015.[l] In *Compton*, Dre and his mother attend the funeral of Dre's younger brother, Tyree (Keith Powers). Verna is initially presented as the angry black mother but with some extra-dimensional importance because she instils a sense of purpose in Dre. At the moment of Tyree's death, she is presented as a failure because she is unable to protect her sons from premature death and suffering. The positioning of the black male as vulnerable, whether physically penetrated by bullets (Ricky in *Boyz*), beaten and bruised (Eazy in *Compton*), shaking when holding a gun (Malcolm in *Dope*), or mentally by grief (Dre in *Compton*), humanises the black male of the hood characterised by media outlets as dysfunctional and pathological; he is reinvented beyond simplistic hardness. Paying the price for this reconfiguration is the black mother who is unable to protect her son from such scenarios.

45 In 2016, black mothers have spoken on the (publicised) loss of their children as part of Hillary Clinton's initiative, "Mothers of the Movement." Clinton has provided (some) black women with a platform to discuss (with an ultimate aim of reducing) gun violence amongst black communities and police violence against non-white bodies. Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland who died in police custody in 2015, has contributed to Clinton's campaign which arguably attempts to secure black votes in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Clinton previously supported her husband's Welfare Reform Bill and criminal sentences that disproportionately criminalised young racially marginalised males twenty years previously. However, her status as mother, as nurturer and protector, has amassed support from numerous black mothers whose children *still* require protection which they *still* cannot themselves provide. The risk is that the black mother is rendered as someone who requires intervention by non-blacks who act as saviours. This is particularly poignant today when considering Clinton's "Mothers of the Movement." In re-writing history, the white mother protects and cares for the black child leaving the black mother to maintain a position where she is deemed incapable of raising her own children.

7. Conclusion: Omitting Violence against Black Women

46 Returning to the male hood academically and cinematically, albeit through a selected sample that does not encompass all male hood narratives available but recognises the

mainstream appeal of the three films studied, illustrates that some progress has been made in film. In March 2016, star of *Dope* Zoe Kravitz spoke on the "open dialogue right now about women in Hollywood and black women and black men in Hollywood and everything in between," suggesting development in the industry, particularly in relation to the Oscars nominations backlash.[li] Kravitz contended, "It's our responsibility to say 'I'm not going to take the same role over and over again,'" critiquing the acceptance of typecast roles by black actors, rather than placing blame with filmmakers.[lii] In the same article it was noted that "Kravitz saw" *Dope* "as an instant classic in the vein of "Friday" and "Boyz n the Hood."[liii] While contending that Hollywood is progressing, *Dope* is ironically positioned with films from the ghetto action cycle in which black women's roles relied on stereotypes. Malcolm's mother, Lisa, fails to fulfil the angry black woman role yet she is too incapable of protecting her son from the ills of the streets; Malcolm must accomplish this himself by securing admission to Harvard University. Diggy offers a new dimension to the male hood, but is still termed a "bitch" by the bouncer and chooses to question the use of racial epithets rather than the derogatory gendered terms Shalika previously took issue with in *Boyz*.

47 The 2015 releases of *Dope* and *Compton* and the press sampled illustrates the continuing importance that race occupies in the Obama era and in a supposed "post-racial" America. While discussions of Obama's own racial identity have been a point of controversy, conversations surrounding race more generally and his election in 2008 fuelled new discussions which have remained constant throughout his two terms: "Since the 2008 election of President Barack Obama [...] race has become an even more vexing topic of public discourse in America" (Rajakumar & Saiyed 105). Race issues are continually positioned at the forefront of political and public debate, leaving gender and the experiences of black women to be continually eclipsed by race. Statistically the black female body is less susceptible to gang, gun and police violence when compared to the black male but the focus on his vulnerability to such forces suggests that hood "problems" do not impinge on the young women in the hood to the same extent as they do the young men. We learn nothing of Nakia's upbringing or her family structure in *Dope* and there is only an implication that Brandi's father is absent purely because we do not see him on-screen. Besides the death of Verna's son and her single parent status, social struggles that arise in the hood are not forced upon the females in *Compton*, logically due to the narrative focus of the boys. The humanisation of the boys in the hood is in part a result of their vulnerability, but this is also achieved in *Compton* through the revision and omission of history which warrants consideration. In the press sampled, *Compton's* omission of violence against women was the most frequent topic discussed.[liv] Representations of gender and race in *Compton* could simply be regarded as a reflection of "reality;" a biopic that represents the time period, real life incidents and returns to the "bitches" and "hoes" because of its context. Indeed, I started this article stating that NWA's story undeniably requires revisiting these images. Equally, what the film ignores illustrates an awareness of the ghetto action cycle and the representations that were acceptable, and those that were not.

48 Black women were not the victims of abuse in the ghetto action movie despite researchers finding high rates of abuse in impoverished areas against black women.[lv] This can be understood in part by the screening of single-headed households in these movies. However, black women were victims of Dr. Dre's abuse in the period portrayed in *Compton* . Numerous incidents, including the throwing of journalist Dee Barnes through a door and

the reported abuse of Dr. Dre's partner, Michel'le ("a quiet girlfriend who got beat up and told to sit down and shut up"), are negated from the film.[lvi] In preserving a public image that has been cultivated on the basis of coolness and "keepin' it real," the battering of black women does not correlate with a perception of cool. Ironically, its omission fails at "keepin' it real." Dr. Dre has since apologised for his violence, rebuking his previous sentiment expressed in *Rolling Stone* (1991) that "it ain't no big thing."[lvii] The omission of domestic violence against black women in *Compton* could be read as a deliberate rejection of the gendered and raced clichés of both the violent black male and "Black women's sexual vulnerability and powerlessness as victims of rape and domestic violence" (Hine 912). Yet more obvious is how *Compton's* strategy of negation corresponds with the wider side-lining of black women's experiences by society. Crenshaw reminds us that "Although Black women are routinely killed, raped and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality."[lviii] Such negation has resulted in the coining of #SayHerName (2015) by the African American Policy Forum in an effort to recognise violence against black women and girls.

49 The year of *Compton* and *Dope's* release also saw the viral circulation of the clip of a fifteen-year-old black Texan girl, Dajerria Becton, thrown to the ground by an armed white male police officer. The incident, viewed on YouTube over twelve-million times, caused public outrage partly due to Becton's young age.[lix] Unlike the beating of King in 1991, the violent episode led the police officer's resignation. Violence against black males by white police officers is far from accepted but has almost become routinely expected. At the time of writing, Alton Sterling and Philandro Castile have been added to the ever-growing list of black males killed by the authorities. By comparison, the beating of black (and particularly young) female bodies is arguably more shocking. Indeed, reviewing *Compton* and its omission of violence for *Gawker*, Dee Barnes contended "The truth is too ugly for a general audience."[lx] While the press sampling revealed that audiences are keen to bring to light *Compton's* exclusions, Barnes suggests that audiences are not actually prepared for such brutal depictions. To view such violence on-screen means acknowledging that violence against black women and girls exists. Real life violence against black women is thus absent in reel life as *Compton* re-writes history to re-focus on the male boys in the hood, despite the reality that black women are integral to their history. Black Lives Matter was founded by three black women, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, and black women have a long and vital involvement in the fight for black rights in the US. They have publically and politically confronted the consequences of being black but the realities of being a black woman or girl require further attention.

50 As a group, NWA made history, fuelling rap with controversial and commercially successful lyrics. For Amanda Nell Edgar, NWA's 1988 song "Fuck tha Police," featured in *Compton,* "remains as poignant as ever; even within this changing cultural framework, little progress has been made in terms of racialized police violence" (Edgar 226). In his review of *Compton*, Charles Taylor concurs; "the police harassment detailed in the song [...] has never stopped being true" (Taylor 78). While this is correct, NWA's selective on-screen history reminds us why, in the words of Michele Wallace, it is "important that black women "write" their own histories, since the power to write one's own history is what making history appears to be all about" (Wallace xxv). On October 15th 2016 (during America's National Domestic Violence Awareness Month), the made-for-TV movie, *Surviving Compton: Dre, Suge and Michel'le* (*Surviving Compton*), premiered on Lifetime.

Narrated by Michel'le, *Surviving Compton* opens with her words, "History gets told by the winners. I got my own history, my own story about a girl from the hood." In the biographical drama *Surviving Compton*, a drunk Dre beats the successful R&B singer-songwriter Michel'le while she is in bed, giving her a bloodied and bruised face which she covers with makeup (29:21-29:43). While doing so, Michel'le's voiceover informs the viewer that, in rap "the women were just bitches to be slapped and/or hoes to be passed around. Rap was about rage, not beauty. Rap hated most women because it had to hurt somebody, and it did" (30:36). Operating within the wider hip hop framework, the black male hood movie does not physically hurt black women in the way that NWA tied, raped and killed a woman in their 1991 single "One Less Bitch." But almost twenty-five years later, Hollywood's ghetto streets still ultimately depend on and profit from silencing, undermining and stereotyping the lives of black women and girls. This is a pattern that reifies the requirement for more dimension to be added to roles of black women in film and for the broader treatment of black women and girls in society to be reassessed.

51 *Surviving Compton* was directed by Janice Cooke, written by Dianne Houston and edited by Sandy Pereira, revising rap's history through women's perspectives and with a much smaller platform and budget when compared to *Compton*. The tendency of filmmakers and studios to position males in front and behind the camera contributes to the continual recycling of cinematic conventions. According to Straus, "There's probably going to be a wave of copycats coming out, of movies that want to be like *Straight Outta Compton*, that people are making because of the success."[lxi] *Boyz's* director was attached to a Tupac biopic film in 2014 during its earliest stages but exited the project due to creative differences revealing that he will produce another film on the rapper's life.[lxii] The forthcoming release of a Tupac biopic directed by Benny Boom, *All Eyez on Me*, is set to be released in June 2017. Tupac penned songs considered to empower black women as he spoke of their issues in poor communities while denigrating them in others through demeaning terminology. As he was accused and convicted of sexually abusing a black woman in 1993, it will be interesting to see how black male directors handle the subject. *Dogg Pound 4 Life*, a biopic of Tupac, Snoop Dogg and Tha Dogg Pound, is already in production and has been dubbed the (unofficial) sequel to *Compton*.[lxiii] The extent to which this series of films will revisit the ghetto action cycle, its conversations and the representation of black women and girls remains to be seen.

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Queen Latifah, "U.N.I.T.Y" (1993) *Black Reign* (album) Motown Records., Written by Queen Latifah, Kier "Kay Gee" Gist of Naughty By Nature.

Magazines

n.a. "Rap Star Eazy-E Battles Aids; Listed In Critical Condition in LA Hospital," *Jet.* 3 April 1995, Vol.87, No. 21.Top of FormBottom of Form pp.13-14.

n.a. "Black Women Crusade Against 'Gangsta Rap,'" *Jet.* 10 January 1994, Vol. 85, No. 10. p.15.

NOTES

i. See George H. W. Bush, "Inaugural Address," Washington, D.C. January 20, 1989.
ii. Cultural Scholar S. Craig Watkins first uses the term in *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
iii. Figures from IMDb (Internet Movie Database).
iv. Waters quoted in Philips.
v. C. Delores Tucker quoted in *Jet* "Black Women Crusade."
vi. Ibid
vii. Web articles pertaining to ghetto action movies and their twenty-five year anniversaries in 2016 were published by numerous media outlets. For example, *Vibe* (Camille Augustin) revisited *Boyz* and *New Jack City's* anniversary was covered by *Complex* (Julian Kimble) with *Ambrosia for Heads* (Jake Paine) interviewing the film's screenwriter Barry Michael Cooper.
viii. In July 2016, the BFI announced the launch of "Black Star" in recognition of black screen actors. As part of this programme of events, *Boyz* was re-released.

ix. "Who you callin' a hoe?" is a question posed by Shalika in *Boyz N the Hood*.

x. Scholarship (of varying length) on *Boyz N the Hood* (through a predominantly gender and/or race framework) includes but is certainly not limited to; Michael Eric Dyson (1992); Michelle Wallace (1992) Robyn Wiegman **(**1993); Glen Masato Mimura (1996); S. Craig Watkins (1998); Gwendolyn Pough (2004); Paul Gormley (2005); Sarinah Masukor (2015).

xi. In 2015, Devair Jeffries and Rhonda Jeffries briefly revisited *Boyz* in a discussion of black female identity. In an article ("Mentoring and Mothering Black Femininity in the Academy") that sought to explore black women's objectification in contemporary television and film (using examples such as television series *Being Mary Jane* (2014)), *Boyz* was utilised to illustrate the hypersexualising of young black women's bodies in cultural products. *Boyz* thus continues to be revisited by scholars illustrating its importance today but academics have not yet considered comparative analysis with both *Straight Outta Compton* and *Dope*.

xii. Rodney E. Hero and Caroline J. Tolbert explain "a post-racial America" as "a theoretical concept where the United States is devoid of racial preferences, discrimination, and prejudice."

xiii. I sampled twenty-five (fifty in total) pieces of press material (magazines, newspaper reviews, online articles and television transcripts) for *Straight Outta Compton* and *Dope* ranging from internationally circulated newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* to local newspapers including *Lexington Herald-Leader* and tabloid press such as the *New York Daily News*. This is by no means a formal reception study, but provides crucial insight into how and if press responded to the representation of black women and girls on screen. Material was accessed via NewsBank Inc., an international news database, and page numbers for articles were not always available.

xiv. In the press sampled, Knight offered the only comparison of the two films.

xv. Singleton quoted in Markman.

xvi. Strauss quoted in Crowley.

xvii. *Set It Off* is not a case study in this article because I am specifically exploring films that centre on black boys in the hood and their representation of black women.

xviii. See Terry Gross's *NPR* interview with Famuyiwa.

xix. Famuyiwa quoted in Gross.

xx. Famuyiwa quoted in D'Alessandro.

xxi. The GooglePlay Double Feature Product listing is available online. See: https://play.google.com/store/movies/details/Straight_Outta_Compton_Dope_Double_Feature?id=eUKSP9ly0x4&hl=en_GB

xxii. The unrated version of *Straight Outta Compton* was released in the UK and US in January 2016.

xxiii. The "positive" father / son relationship has been observed by many, including for example; Melvin Burke Donalson (2007, 38); Michael A. Messner (2007, 66); Claire Jenkins (2015, 133).

xxiv. Dyson offers a positive reading of the film as a "vision of black life that transcends insular preoccupations with 'positive' or 'negative' images and instead presents at once the limitations and virtues of black culture." However, he also notes how Singleton "is less successful in challenging the logic that at least implicitly blames single black women for the plight of black children" (1992, 133). For Pough, *Boyz* offers "pathological readings of Black motherhood" (2004, 131).

xxv. Both bell hooks and Michele Wallace note how historically, whether "after slavery ended" (hooks, 1992:92) or during the civil rights movement (Wallace), black women's independence has been considered as an obstacle to black masculinity and has thus contributed to tensions between black women and men.

xxvi. In the press sampled, the representation of mothers in Gray's film was only noted by Richard Brody (*New Yorker*), who suggested that "The mothers make demands" implying a

negative representation on screen. Malcolm's mother was referenced only fleetingly by reviewers to note that Malcolm lived with his mother in the hood.

xxvii. See Caramancia, "'Dope' Revisits the 'Hood with Joy and Witt."

xxviii. "Queen Bitch" featured on the 1996 *Hard Core* album by Lil Kim; "Baddest Bitch" is a song performed by Minaj on the 2008 album *Sucka Free*; and Amber Levonchuck (publicly known as Amber Rose) released her first book *How to Be a Bad Bitch* in 2015.

xxix. DJ Yella discussed his adult filmmaking career in a 2015 interview with the *Daily Beast.* See Yamato, "The N.W.A Member Turned Pornographer."

xxx. Gray quoted in Berkowitz.

xxxi. Gray quoted in Davis.

xxxii. Gray quoted in Berkowitz.

xxxiii. The casting call first appeared on Sande Allesi Casting's Facebook page and has since been removed but reposted and referenced by publications such as *Spin* (Stutz) and *Gawker* (Nolan).

xxxiv. Berona quoted in Hamilton.

xxxv. Universal Pictures quoted in Couch.

xxxvi. Milani quoted in Chan.

xxxvii. Clemons quoted in Bendix.

xxxviii. Recent articles on the topic (but by no means an exhaustive list) have been published by the *Huffington Post* (Malcolm-Aime Musoni), *Guardian* (Julious Britt) and *Salon* (D. Watkins).

xxxix. See Scott, "'Dope' a Teenage Comedy."

xl. See Kimberle Williams Crenshaw's "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew" for an in-depth discussion of 2 Live Crew's court case and *Nasty*.

xli. See Freer "Dope Review." See James, "'Dope' Finds Teenage Humor in the 'Hood."

xlii. O'Reilly articulated his sentiment on the "Obama Chronicles" segment of the September 16 edition of Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor* (2008).

xliii. Data taken from the decennial censuses 1980.

xliv. See "Dear Mama" Tupac (1995).

xlv. According to the 2010 census, black female householders with no spouse present totalled 30.1 percent compared to 9.9 percent for white female householders. See: https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-14.pdf

xlvi. See Strauss, "The Original 'Straight Outta Compton' Producer."

xlvii. Since *Compton's* release, Heller has noted of this agreement in a number of interviews. For example, see Kory Grow's article "Jerry Heller Talks 'Compton' Lawsuit, 'Very Hurtful' Movie" *Rolling Stone* November 3, 2015.

xlviii. Eazy-E quoted in *Jet,* "Rap Star Eazy-E Battles Aid."

xlix. According to one of Wright's daughters, E.B., her father had guns pulled on him by Knight but was not beaten up. See: http://thesource.com/2015/09/04/truth-revealed-by-eazy-es-daughter-e-b-on-drzoetoday/

l. Grey's death and the urgency of Gray's film today in light of recent events (including police shootings and Ferguson) was alluded to by some reviewers in the press sampled, including *New Yorker* (Richard Brody) and two *New York Times* articles (Michael Cieply and Manohla Dargis).

li. Kravitz quoted in Bahr.

lii. Ibid

liii. See Bahr "Zoe Kravitz's DIY Plan."

liv. Articles published by the *Huffington Post* (Hutchinson), *New York Times* (Coscarelli), *Los Angeles Times* (Kennedy), *MIC* (Cheney-Rice), *Gawker* (Barnes) and *Guardian* (Holpuch) contributed to the discussion of Dr. Dre's abusive past.

lv. See for example, Carolyn West, *Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women*. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence/ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence (October, 2006). See: http://www.vawnet.org

lvi. Michel'le quoted in Trinh.
lvii. Dr. Dre quoted in Light.
lviii. Crenshaw quoted in AAPF.
lix. The seven minute YouTube video was published on June 6 2015 and as of March 28 2016 had been viewed over 12,614,000 times. Video available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R46-XTqXkzE
lx. See Barnes "Here's What's Missing From *Straight Outta Compton.*"
lxi. Strauss quoted in Crowley.
lxii. See Kory Grow "John Singleton Exits Tupac Biopic, Plans Competing Film," *Rolling Stone,* April 9, 2015.
lxiii. See Iyana Robertson's article "The 'Dogg Pound 4 Life' Film Has Begun Shooting And Now Has A Full Cast," *Vibe*, September 8, 2015.

ABSTRACTS

This paper analyses two recent ghetto action movies: *Dope* (2015) and *Straight Outta Compton* (2015). It argues that in returning to the cinematic hood in 2015, it is necessary and logical to revisit literature surrounding *Boyz N the Hood* (1991) to assess if images of black women and girls have evolved in contemporary films. When the narrative is preoccupied with the black boys in the hood, are they still raised by their single black (angry) mothers and are young black women still left to question "Who you callin' a hoe?" These questions will be answered through an examination of the representations of gender and race in all three films.

INDEX

Keywords: Black women, hood film, ghetto action movie, violence